

## FMQB Cover Story

# Dom Theodore

### VP/CHR Programming, CBS Radio

By Fred Deane

*When someone describes his industry as an “unhealthy obsession,” you kind of get an idea of where his passion index registers regarding his field of endeavor. And if you’ve ever spent any appreciable time with Dom Theodore, you would understand how much this man truly loves radio. Growing up in radio rich Detroit and listening to seminal Top 40 stations like CKLW and WHYT, it’s easy to reason why radio became his profession of choice. Those stations were significant pieces of American Top 40 folklore, with a host of influential individuals who carried the Pop torch in Motown.*

*Yes it was pure passion and unrestrained inspiration that drew Dom to radio, but it was also a ton of hard work for he never saw a job in radio too menial to do. As he developed his passion and work ethic for the field he would spend an entire career in, Theodore seemed to get to all the right places at all the right times. Most notably in the nineties, he was one of the chosen few given the opportunity of a lifetime to program the legendary WFLZ.*

*This past decade was kind to Dom as well as he spent a good portion of the time working at Clear Channel Radio in various capacities, highlighted by a demonstrative run as PD of WKQI/Detroit. While at KQI, Dom and his team dominated the Top 40 scene and he was rewarded with a larger role with Clear Channel as he became CHR Brand Manager and ultimately VP of Programming.*

*In October of 2008, CBS Radio announced the appointment of Dom Theodore as VP/CHR Programming. In January of 2009, Dom surfaced in his new role with CBS, and by March of last year he was a central figure in orchestrating a flip of WXRK from Rock to CHR introducing the Big Apple to 92.3 NOW. It was CBS’s second of three flips to CHR inside of a year in three major markets. The third change came last October when the CBS Detroit Smooth Jazz outlet traded Kenny G for Lady Gaga and morphed into 98.7 AMP Radio, as Dom and company now compete head to head with his former Clear Channel radio house in Motown.*



**CBS made decisive moves in converting to CHR in three major markets last year. What was the rationale behind these moves?**

Very simply, we saw an opportunity to grow revenue by growing audience in female 18-34 demos within our clusters. We also saw a few competitive weaknesses in each market to exploit. Multiple CHR’s were the norm in major markets a few years back, and PPM is showing more young listeners are using radio than many originally believed, so we’re just taking advantage of the opportunity the marketplace has presented us.

**In LA, NY and Detroit, CBS is going head to head with incumbent Clear Channel CHR players. Are you sensing the industry energy relative to this competitive environment?**

Yes, and I love it. When you look at the sheer size of the CHR audience in most major markets you see the opportunity for additional players. Competition makes our format better.

**You have been particularly hands on with 92.3 NOW in New York. What progress has the station made in the market that dictates you're on the right course?**

The ratings growth we've achieved since launching in mid-March of '09 has been tremendous. Not only has our 6+ come doubled and we are now #1 in teens, but our share has doubled, tripled and quadrupled in key female demos. The ratings trajectory reminds me a lot of the WKQI/WDRQ battle in many ways. But in that case, we at least started with a decent female come left over from the previous adult CHR format at WKQI. In New York, very little of the former K-Rock audience was going to convert to CHR, and in the end there was very little K-Rock come left anyway, so it was like signing on a move-in signal and starting from scratch.

Our amazingly talented team of **Rob Wagman** (APD/MD), **Lisa Paige** (middays), **Tic Tak** (PM Drive), **Chunky** (nights), **Buster** (late nights), and **Dave Rocco** (Programming Assistant) have worked very hard to achieve some big successes in 2009, and what we're most excited about as we enter 2010 is the addition of **Nick Cannon** to our talent lineup in morning drive. Nick is a superstar and a great fit. Most of the morning show hosts that target 18-34 year-old women in New York are 45+ years old, but Nick is in our target demo and will bring a fresh new sound to morning drive. I'm thrilled to have him on our team.

**How difficult of a challenge is it going up against such a successful and legendary station like Z100?**

The challenge of taking on such a highly established brand is what excited me most about this opportunity. We knew going into this that it was going to take a significant level of commitment to compete in such a crowded marketplace with strong, established brands, but we are making that commitment and it's paying off.

**Given your knowledge of the Detroit market and the direct competitor (WKQI), what do you anticipate the prospect to be for 98.7 AMP Radio?**

So far 98.7 AMP Radio is off to a great start with rapid early success. We filled a legitimate hole for a true mainstream Top 40 in that market. WKQI, by design, was always very Rhythmic-leaning, and the hyper-core of that station expects it. Every time I tried to force that station more toward the center, the ratings dipped. WKQI P1's have a legitimate expectation of a heavy Rhythmic bend. 98.7 AMP Radio filled the hole for a true mainstream Top 40 playing both Pop/Rock and Pop/Rhythmic genres.

**You're a prime example of a programmer coming up through the ranks and achieving a significant executive position in your field. What were the keys to maintaining upward mobility throughout your career?**

I don't want to over-simplify, but honestly the single biggest difference maker for me has been maintaining the love and passion for our medium that I've had ever since I started listening to the radio as a young kid in Detroit to stations like CKLW, Tower 92 and WCZY. But my real obsession was with WHYT during the (**Mike Joseph**) *Hot Hits* days in the early '80's. I was the 11 year-old kid that used to call and request promotional items all the time. One day I actually spoke with **Maureen Hathaway**, the GM at the time, and she invited me up to the Fisher Building for a tour of the station. I'll never forget looking through the window at the jock punching up the *Hot Hits* jingles. I knew then that's what I wanted to do when I grew up.

I still have that same feeling of anticipation whenever I walk into a radio station today. It doesn't matter if it's in New York or Battle Creek. When I walk into a radio station I feel that same energy that drew me to this industry, and when I listen to a great radio station I still get the same inspiration I had when I was a kid listening to the radio. I suppose in some ways it's an unhealthy obsession, but I think that's the secret to a great radio station: it needs to entertain and INSPIRE. And those that are inspired can achieve anything in this business.

**What insights can you impart to aspiring programmers to help them accelerate their career development?**

Some of the biggest opportunities in my career came along because I did the jobs that nobody else wanted to do and I learned something new from every one of those experiences. I started answering phones as an intern at WCZY/Detroit, and then eventually landed a paid job when **Michael J. Foxx** (who did PM Drive at WHYT) introduced me to their Music Director **Mark Jackson**. Mark hired me into the research department at WHYT where we did our own callout. I was a teenager, and would hang out in the studio whenever I could. The opportunity to have access to the 22<sup>nd</sup> floor where the studios were was what I lived for. Dubbing network spots onto carts was the price I had to pay to be able to sit in **Chris Conn**'s production room and watch him build promos on the analog tape multi-track machine. He would let me try it on my own, and he even let me have a key to his studio so I could play around creating my own promos after hours. Sometimes I would spend the night and produce imaging for the weekend mix shows. At age 16, my parents didn't believe me when I said I actually spent the night at the radio station. Eventually Chris hired me to be his production assistant and I moved out of the research department. I spent as much time as I could in the offices of Mark Jackson and (PD) **Rick Gillette**, asking lots of questions about program-

ming philosophy, and why we did what we did. Every once in a while, our consultant **Jerry Clifton** would come in and the next thing you know we were putting up signs that said "Shut up and say something" in the studio, and the format clock would change. I asked tons of questions, and amazingly, Gillette would answer them all and explained the moves to me.

Doing the jobs that nobody else wanted to do also played a major role later on when I worked at the Power Pig in Tampa. I remember doing both middays and late nights (eight hours of on-air per day), plus my full-time production responsibilities, because other jocks were on vacation and (OM) **BJ Harris** was short-staffed. But, that type of work ethic caught the attention of both BJ and (APD) **Jeff Kapugi**. Later on when Jeff was PD and needed an APD/MD, he hired me. When Jeff moved to St. Louis to launch KSLZ, BJ hired me as PD of FLZ. All of these opportunities that I wanted came along because I was willing to do the jobs nobody else wanted to do.

**Was there any one rule that guided you that stands out as you look back?**

In **Malcolm Gladwell's** book *The Outliers*, he talks about the "10,000 hour rule," which essentially says that true expertise in any endeavor can only be achieved after 10,000 hours of practice. Doing the jobs that nobody else wanted to do, gave me the opportunity to get well over 10,000 hours of experience in several different areas of a radio station, and it was a HUGE advantage. But to immerse yourself in it requires a passion level beyond a typical job...like I said, unhealthy obsession.

**For successful programming executives, is there a feeling of responsibility to nurture and inspire the next generation of radio managers?**

I feel a tremendous responsibility to help develop the next generation of programmers and on-air talent. Part of it comes from wanting to be a good steward of the industry, and most of it

comes from pure selfishness since I can't build great radio stations without great talent! But I don't think the industry as a whole has done a great job in this area, mostly because a lot of the entry-level positions have been eliminated. How can someone get 10,000 hours of experience today?

**What is CBS Radio doing in this area specifically to cultivate young talent and managers?**

It starts at the top, with our CEO **Dan Mason**, SVPP's **Greg Strassell** and **Kevin Weatherly**, and VP/Original Content **Chris Oliviero**. They have established a creative environment at CBS Radio where programmers can take intelligent risks on up-and-coming talent if we find a rising star. On the CHR team, I have challenged our PD's to find rising stars within our own ranks and share with our team so we can grow talent from within as opportunities present themselves. As I mentioned, Nick Cannon, our new morning host on 92.3 NOW in New York, is a great example of the kind of intelligent risk-taking I'm referring to on the talent side. **Buster**, who does late nights for us in New York was a part-time on-air personality for me previously at WKQI/Detroit. On the management side, **Pat "Grooves" Cerullo**, my APD/MD in Detroit, is a great example of an up-and-coming programming talent who is doing a fantastic job in his first major market APD/MD role. Rob Wagman, my APD/MD in New York, was already a highly accomplished programmer before he arrived at 92.3 NOW, and his star continues to rise in CBS Radio's programming ranks as my co-pilot in New York.

**What is your interaction with the other CBS Radio Programming execs?**

Format VP's work very closely together, and our SVPP's Greg Strassell and Kevin Weatherly, both work closely with us on a regular basis to set goals and troubleshoot stations. Whenever we need a different perspective or want to brainstorm, we also can access the CBS Radio "brain trust" of tremendous programming talent.

**You've spent much of your career with Clear Channel. How would you contrast the cultures of the two companies relative to general radio management philosophy?**

I came up through the **Randy Michaels'** era at Jacor/Clear Channel, and it was a fun and challenging environment where programmers were empowered to make decisions and take intelligent risks if we thought doing so would grow audience. We were given the tools needed to win, and the opportunity to put them to use in new and creative ways. My experience at CBS Radio has been very similar to that. Dan (Mason) and Greg (Strassell) constantly challenge us to re-think radio and empower us to find new and creative ways to grow audience. There is a genuine passion for great radio in this company, and that energy runs through every department.

**You have often spoken highly of Clear Channel radio programmers particularly Alex Tear. Can you elaborate on the storied relationship you've had with Alex over the years?**

You have to understand that Alex and I have known each other for nearly twenty years, and became friends when we both worked together at WTCF/Saginaw back in the early '90's. He and I would network all of the time and trade ideas long before we became competitors in 2002. At one point when I was in Houston at KRBE, I was looking to move closer to home to be near my father who had health problems at the time. Alex and I were having

conversations about me possibly going to WDRQ as PD reporting to him as he was preparing to become OM at WDRQ/WDVD. Due to circumstances it never did materialize and in January 2002, I ended up at WKQI competing against him.

It was a little awkward, but I called him literally the day before it was being announced and told him I was going to KQI. When ABC flipped DRQ in 2005, I called Alex the following Monday and asked if it was a stunt because it happened on April Fools Weekend. Alex said no and that he was out. I immediately called **John Rohm** (the Clear Channel Market Manager in Pittsburgh at the time), and **Gene Romano**, our (CC) SVPP, and told them I wanted to hire Alex for the WKST/Pittsburgh opening that had just become available as I was the Brand Manager of Kiss at the time. Alex was hired very quickly, and now he's OM of CC Miami. He is one of the brightest and best, and I'm glad to see that company embrace him the way they are.

**You've always been a fierce competitor but at the same time have (quietly) respected your competition. Do you truly have to toss out all rules when you're in battle with a direct competitor?**

**Scott Shannon** used to say "Radio is a lot like professional wrestling, only here the blood is real." I think that sums it up pretty well. My job is to win the Arbitron game at all costs, and I've always tried to be as objective as possible in any competitive situation I've been in. When I see a competitor make a smart move, I respect that (and counter it if needed). When I see them fall into my traps, I laugh as I watch them drown. Make no mistake, my job is to put the win on the board, and I will do what I have to do to meet that objective, even if it means "scorched earth". However, in my role I also have to identify great talent, and sometimes through the process of competing with someone, you learn how good they really are.

Two of the best examples were **Orlando Davis** at WLLD/Tampa (when I was at WFLZ), and **Alex Tear** at WDRQ (when I was at WKQI), as I mentioned earlier. Both were friends of mine long before we competed with each other, and I knew how good both of them were before we were competitors. I even pushed to hire Orlando for nights at FLZ before Wild hired him from Tallahassee. There's no better way to test the mettle of a programmer than to compete with them. When they're a good competitor, I always make it a point to shake hands in the end and say "good game" no matter who wins the game, because one of us may want to hire the other at some point.

**Has radio's management of the product gotten too clinical these days? Are we over analyzing the product based on the overflow of data that radio relies so heavily on?**

From a programming perspective I believe there's a bit of "analysis paralysis" regarding the product. In many cases, programmers are over-thinking it. Programmers today need to be more willing to take chances. I feel that given the sheer amount of data at our disposal these days, people are spending too much time analyzing too much data instead of attempting product innovations. We have to focus on what we do in between the records, and we need to stop being afraid to make new mistakes.

PPM has given us a good excuse to take the easy way out and just play lots of music with very little content building, and that's a huge miscalculation with long term consequences for our medium. We can't just say, "Well, according to PPM we should just be a music machine because those are the stations that get rewarded." I've said for years that the best appliance ever created for the purpose of dispensing music is the iPod. But radio can provide a layer of companionship that the iPod and other appliances can't. This is a critical message that must be heard. We need to wake up and recognize that companionship is truly our greatest asset, and we shouldn't be minimizing this strength. We need to enhance it so people actually build an emotional relationship with radio. In a world of many delivery systems, those with the best 'deliveries' win.

**You're already on record stating you firmly believe in the Zapoleon Music Cycle theory and feel we are currently on course for significant changes in CHR music. What do you envision coming?**

I do believe in the Music Cycle, and we are going to start seeing changes this year. It really started toward the end of last year. **Guy Zapoleon** has it right. It's approximately a 10 year cycle, and we are starting to see "extremes" that are hard to marry into a single audience coalition. We will see that continue through 2010, and it can become a slippery slope if we're not careful.

**As a programming VP for the company, are there any philosophies you are trying to instill in your PD's as you work with them along the way?**

Start with flawless execution of the basics and never forget that we are in the "entertainment business," which encompasses much more than just music. If we have great music, great talent, and compelling content that's difficult to duplicate, we will win every time.